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A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON FEMALE RESIDENT  
ASSISTANTS & PERCEIVED STRESS

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

---

by

Kristen N. Osborne

May 2010

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTERS THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Kristen Noel Osborne

entitled

A Qualitative Study on Female Resident Assistants and Perceived Stress

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the  
Master of Arts degree

in Higher Education and Student Development  
May 2010

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers have shown female college students tend to experience stress more often than their male counterparts. However, there is little research regarding female resident assistants and their experiences with stress. In this qualitative study I focused on how female resident assistants perceive stress in their lives. The study was conducted at a small, private, evangelical institution in the Midwest and was guided by four research questions relating to how stress unique to this student leadership role impacts overall student success and well-being. In this study I found female resident assistants do experience stress in a variety of ways, both related and unrelated to being a resident assistant, but are generally able to balance their leadership role with all other areas of their lives.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Resident assistants have a particularly unique leadership position within the university as their position carries responsibilities entirely within their residence halls. The live-in nature of their position results in a challenge to find a balance between student and resident assistant. The position is one characterized by few distinct boundaries which delineate between work time and personal time. Students who serve in this particular leadership role assume additional responsibilities which can precipitate stress-inducing experiences in addition to the academic pressures which are already present in the general day-to-day life of a college student. Continued research on this particular topic area is beneficial as it would afford practitioners within higher education the ability to understand their student leaders in a much more comprehensive manner. Learning about the resident assistants' experiences with stress will enable student development professionals and residence life staff to train and support these students more effectively. The purpose of this study reflects many of these aims but in general I sought to learn more about female resident assistants and their experiences with stress throughout one academic semester.

Before moving forward, however, it is important to define the term "stress" as it is used throughout this study. The theoretical concept of stress was developed by Hans

Selye in 1936, after extensive investigation and research, he defined stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand” (1980, p. 55). Based upon the theoretical foundation Selye provided, Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) developed an appraisal approach for stress which they refer to as “cognitive appraisal.” The main component of this theory is the concept Lazarus and Folkman coined as “perceived stress”, which is the appraisal process an individual uses to evaluate their situation or environment. “The judgment that a particular person-environment relationship is stressful hinges on cognitive appraisal” (p. 21). The cognitive appraisal process occurs on an individual basis. One individual cannot determine what is or is not stressful for another, which is consistent with Selye’s stress theory. In his book, “The Stress of Life,” (1976) Selye stated, “the same stress which makes one person sick can be an invigorating experience for another” (p. xv). According to Lazarus and Folkman, perceived stress by definition is perceived solely by the individual who is in the midst of the situation or environment. The combination of both Selye’s, and Lazarus and Folkman’s stress theories were used to guide this study on the stress experiences of female resident assistants.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to shed light on the experiences of female resident assistants. More specifically, in this study I focused on the stress of female resident assistants during their first semester in the role. By obtaining a better understanding of the experiences and events that induce stress for female resident assistants, university faculty and staff will be better equipped to train and support student leaders as they work alongside them.

### Research Questions

Four research questions were developed regarding female resident assistants and their experiences with stress and were used to guide the development of the study:

- 1.) To what extent do female resident assistants attribute the stress they perceive to be a result of their leadership responsibilities?
- 2.) Do female resident assistants consider the stress associated with their leadership position to impact their academics? If so, how and to what extent?
- 3.) What events or experiences are stress inducing for female resident assistants?
- 4.) Do female resident assistants believe that they have the social support necessary to be successful as a student leader and as a student?

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Psychological Well-Being of College Students

The topic of psychological well being, as it relates to college students, is extremely broad and existing research only touches the tip of the iceberg (Burriss, Brechting, Salsman, & Carlson, 2009). For example, stress and anxiety are two fairly large concepts on their own, and yet they fall under the over-arching topic area of psychological well-being. While this area within higher education research is beginning to garner attention there is still much to be explored. One particular study has shown “regardless of whether a student’s overall psychological well-being is defined as being in the normal or vulnerable population, a greater emphasis is placed on...psychological well-being at all times once they start at [a] university” (Cooke, Bewick, Barkham, Bradley, & Audin, 2006, p. 513). More specifically, the aspects of stress and anxiety within a student’s life are very important to consider when working with college students. In the last quarter century, higher education has been considered to be “a protective ‘buffer’ to mental health issues [but]...current findings suggest that higher education is a time of heightened [stress and] anxiety” (p. 514). The presence of excessive stress or anxiety can have significant impact for college students.

## Stress and Anxiety of College Students

The American College Health Association conducts an annual survey of college student health. In their most recent study they determined “that stress is the foremost impediment to academic performance, outranking the other top 10 impediments to learning” (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley II, & Whalen, 2005, p. 15). Additional research clearly shows students do in fact experience heightened levels of stress, accompanied by higher levels of anxiousness throughout the college years (Darling, 2007; Cooke, et al., 2006; Cushman & West, 2006; Zajacova, 2005).

The specific experience of stress is not something that has been found to be typically surprising to students. Research tells us most students assume stress is an inevitable characteristic associated with the college experience (Cushman & West, 2006). Although students assume they will experience stress throughout college, “research that focuses specifically on college student stress and the behaviors that precipitate and promote [stress] is limited” (p. 26). In the same regard, little research has been conducted to determine the symptoms of anxiety as it relates to college students (Oliver, Reed, & Smith, 1998). It is almost as if researchers have determined stress and anxiety are simply inevitable characteristics of the college experience. It as though it does not require any additional attention, except the mere acknowledgement of its presence in the lives of students.

It is important to note stress experienced by college students is not strictly from academics, however, the stress students do experience can have a fairly significant impact on a student’s academic performance (Paladino, Murray, Newgent, & Gohn, 2005). Various aspects of a student’s personal life can creep into the picture and end up having

an impact on the student's academic performance, and on the likelihood of continuing with their education (Zajacova, 2005). In the study, "Precursors to college student burnout: Developing a typology of understanding," Cushman and West (2006) found a student's level of academic performance is influenced by their "family, job, health, finances, or other people" in their life (p. 23). Furthermore, researchers have found the relationships a student has can influence academic success (Darling, 2007; Cushman & West, 2006). If a student is constantly being pulled away from their schoolwork to handle matters with family members, friends, or significant others, there is an increased risk of low academic performance (Cushman & West, 2006; Paladino et al., 2005). Not only is the student devoting time to these troubled relationships, but they also have to deal with the psychological effects which accompany these situations. There is a consistent theme in the research indicating students who are juggling several different responsibilities often find themselves overwhelmed and struggling to be academically successful.

### Coping Mechanisms of College Students

Closely connected to the presence of stress in one's life is the ability for one to cope with stress in a healthy manner. However, there is limited research with regard to coping mechanisms students use to combat stress. The small amount of research available on this topic has shown students who have developed strong problem solving and time management skills are typically able to cope with the stress in their lives more successfully than others (Misra & McKean, 2000). In addition, students who consider themselves "religious" are often able to cope with the stress in their lives much more easily than those who do not claim a religious faith (Bird & Boyatt, 2005; Hong, 2008). It seems as if strong problem solving and time management skills, in addition to simply

believing in a higher power, even though it may not be God, enable students to cope and find comfort in the midst of stressful life events.

### Gender Differences Regarding Anxiety and Stress

Gender differences regarding anxiety and stress have received more research attention and the trends are fairly easy to identify. In general, female college students struggle with stress and anxiety more so than males (Dusselier et al., 2005; Hicks & Miller, 2006; Misra & McKean, 2000; Stevenson & Harper, 2006). Female students have reported they experience “more psychological and psychosomatic problems, such as irritation, depression, anxiety, headaches, and tiredness, than the male college students... yet more female college students were willing to seek or ask for help” (Hicks & Miller, 2006, p. 28). Interestingly, one study found females were able to manage their time more effectively than males; however the academic stress female students perceived still did not decrease (Misra & McKean, 2000).

Males and females also show differences in the types and amount of stress they experience as a result of their relationships (Darling, 2007; Hicks & Miller, 2006). The relationships students have with family members have been found to have an impact on males and females alike: the better the relationships at home, the less relationship stress the student will experience. Females without family stress were found to be more emotionally and physically healthy and have a better quality of life (Darling, 2007). Females typically “visit and contact their parents on a more frequent basis than do males” which implies, in general, females invest more time into maintaining relationships (p. 226). This does not imply males do not value relationships, but according to the research there is generally more of an intentional effort on the part of females.

### Stress Associated with the Role of a Resident Assistant

Colleges and universities have enlisted the work of student paraprofessionals since the colonial period, and the most common area for students to work is within residence life (Winston & Ender, 1988). These students are commonly referred to as resident assistants. The college experience for a resident assistant is similar to that of other students. They still face similar obstacles and challenges, but they also must work to cope with the additional stressors which accompany their leadership role.

Resident assistants often deal with sensitive situations which they must keep confidential. There are various other tasks and responsibilities that come along with this leadership role and the type of work they are asked to do can take an emotional toll on the individual. This has proven to be especially true at universities which fail to train their resident assistants well and have not helped in establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries which enable them to be a successful resident assistant (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996; Paladino et al., 2005). Resident assistants are often asked to jump back and forth between various roles which include the role of a student, administrator, role model, teacher, and counselor (Hetherington & And, 1989; Paladino et al., 2005). The constant shifting between roles can be physically, mentally, and emotional exhausting. One article described this as follows: “the nature of the job fosters an environment conducive to burnout” (Hetherington & And, 1989, p. 266). The role itself makes it challenging for the resident assistants to “distinguish work from personal time” and there is a strong likelihood of being interrupted unexpectedly which “allows little opportunity for relaxation, [and] there is always the potential for more work to be completed” (p. 266).

### Social Support and Connectedness of Resident Assistants

Researchers have shown students who feel they have adequate social support are less likely to experience burnout. More specifically, it has been found “social-connectedness of females was found to have a positive impact on perceived stress levels” (Lee, Keough, & Sexton, 2002). One important study which considered the experiences of student paraprofessionals found the following to be true of the student’s experience:

Levels of well-being in university students’ job satisfaction and anxiety/depression were linked with the work environment. High job demands, low control and low peer support do appear to have a negative impact on students’ well-being. These results suggest one can promote student satisfaction and reduce student anxiety/depression by reducing demands, and increasing control and peer support. (Chambel & Curren, 2005, pp. 143)

One earlier study (which was referenced in the discussion on stress) found resident assistants did experience burnout (a result of excessive stress), and females at that time were much more susceptible to burnout than males (Hetherington et al., 1989). However, today’s college students and resident assistants may be experiencing college life much differently than students in the past. One can hypothesize students who are currently serving as resident assistants are likely experiencing high levels of stress throughout the school year as a result of their position, but there is currently minimal literature available which provides insight about stress and the college student leader in the twenty-first century.

## Conclusion

The current literature on stress provides strong evidence the college years for most students contain heightened stress and anxiety (Cooke, et al., 2006; Cushman & West, 2006; Darling, 2007; Dusselier et al., 2005; Zajacova, 2005). Females have also been found to cope more poorly with stress than males during the college years (Hicks & Miller, 2006; Misra & McKean, 2000; Dusselier et al., 2005; Stevenson & Harper, 2006). However, research which provides insight regarding how student leaders experience and cope with stress is less conclusive. One particular area which needs to be examined is how student leadership positions, but more specifically resident assistant positions, precipitate additional stress in student's lives and the impact (positive or negative) of such stressors on well-being and overall success.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Design

This study utilized a qualitative research approach due to the small body of research available on this topic. The researcher used a quantitative scale, but due to the manner in which the scale was used, the study is not considered a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative scale was simply used to obtain a mean, perceived stress score for the sample. There was not additional statistical analysis of the scale to prove anything within the study and for that reason the study is not considered to be a mixed-methods study.

The qualitative data collected was analyzed using a phenomenological approach which was comprised of three main steps. First, the researcher reviewed the interviews for “significant statements” (Creswell, 2009, p. 184) regarding the stress experiences of the participants. Secondly, the researcher generated “meaning units,” which depicted the common themes within the interviews. Finally, an “essence description” was developed, which is basically the take home message for the study and is an all-encompassing description of the study’s most important overarching themes.

#### Participants

The participants in the study were students who attended a small, private, evangelical Christian institution with an enrollment of approximately 1,900. The

population studied consisted of the resident assistants on campus which is a group of approximately 75 paraprofessionals. This study focused solely on female students serving in this role. The sample consisted of 10 students, including one student who participated in the pilot interview. At the time of the study, there were five residence halls with female resident assistants and at least one participant from each of the five residence halls was represented in the study. The process of selecting participants began by contacting each Residence Hall Director, explaining the study and asking them to recommend two students from their staff who they believed would be willing to participate in the study and would provide beneficial feedback. Once the Residence Hall Directors made their recommendations, an informative email was sent to each individual student explaining the research project. The email also included the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) which provided additional information about the study. Students were asked to respond to the email if they were willing to participate in the study.

#### Procedure

Once participants were selected, individual interviews were conducted to gain information regarding the four research questions proposed for the study. One pilot interview was conducted to determine how effectively the anticipated questions worked to gather the specific data the researcher was seeking to obtain. Upon completion of the pilot interview, one question was added to more directly address the topic of the student's perceived ability to balance her academic work with her role as a resident assistant. The remaining nine interviews were conducted during the first week of January, which ensured the participants had at least one full semester of experiences as an RA. Interviews lasted approximately twenty-five to forty-five minutes for each participant and

took place in a Residence Hall Director's office and where were also recorded by two audio devices.

### Measure

The researcher began each interview by administering the 10-item scale Perceived Stress Scale developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) (Appendix B). A 5-point Likert scale was used to ask participants to reflect upon their experiences in the last month and rank how often they experienced the type of stress the question as referring to. The purpose of using this scale was to allow the researcher to obtain an average perceived stress level among the participants involved in the study at the time of the interview. The researcher did not review the answers to the scale at any time throughout the interview. The results were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program after all interviews had been completed. An average perceived stress score was determined by calculating the mean score of the sample. The specific way the mean was calculated was by inverting the scores of items 4, 5, 7, and 8 (i.e. 0=4; 1=3; 2=2 etc.) and then summing all 10 items. The scores for each individual survey ranged from 0-40 with larger scores indicating higher levels of stress. The overall perceived stress mean of the sample was determined by summing the individual scores from the PSS and dividing by the sample size. The standard deviation of the sample was also calculated.

Following the completion of the scale, the researcher began the interview which consisted of one introductory question relating specifically to demographic information about the student: year in school, major, etc. Following the introductory question, six specific questions were asked relating directly to their experience the previous semester

as a resident assistant. Interview questions were designed to gather data specifically related to the four research questions the study was designed to answer. The Interview Protocol is provided in Appendix C. The researcher concluded the interview by thanking the participant for their time and reminding them of the services provided at the campus counseling center.

Once all interviews were completed, each one was transcribed and coded for themes and then returned to the participant for review. This process is also known as member checking. The purpose of utilizing member checking was to insure the researcher was accurately representing the experiences of the participants. Students were asked to review the interview and respond in one of two ways. They could either respond by saying the researcher accurately represented their thoughts, or they could provide the researcher with additional field back which would help the researcher analyze the data more accurately. All of the students responded during the member checking process and only two participants felt they needed to provide additional feedback about the researcher's comments, otherwise the participants agreed with the researchers analysis of their interview. Once the necessary changes were made based upon the feedback received from participants, the researcher proceeded with identifying common themes within the data.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The findings will first be reported by providing the mean perceived stress score and standard deviation obtained from the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). The remaining qualitative data will be reported using the six themes which surfaced several times throughout the nine interviews. Quotes from the participant's interviews have been provided throughout the results section to help support and explain the identified themes.

#### Perceived Stress Score

The mean perceived stress score was 19.67 with a standard deviation of 3.86 (Table 2). Scores ranged from 0-40 with larger scores reflecting higher levels of stress. The mean score for this sample falls right in the middle and therefore, we can deduce the participants have experienced some stress in the month prior to the administration of the scale, however, according to the scale the stress experienced as not at a high level.

Figure 1. Perceived Stress Scale.

*Range of Scores*

Question	Participant									Total Score
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
<b>1</b>	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	2	2	18
<b>2</b>	2	1	3	1	2	3	3	3	2	20
<b>3</b>	1	2	3	2	3	4	3	3	3	
<b>4</b>	2	3	2	3	2	2	2	3	3	
<b>5</b>	3	3	2	3	1	2	2	2	4	22
<b>6</b>	1	1	2	1	4	2	3	1	3	
<b>7</b>	3	4	2	3	2	1	2	4	2	
<b>8</b>	2	3	2	4	2	3	3	3	2	24
<b>9</b>	3	1	4	1	2	2	2	1	1	17
<b>10</b>	1	1	3	2	4	3	2	2	1	19

Figure 2. Perceived Stress Scale.

*Inverted Scores for Negatively-Stated Items*

Question	Participant									Total Score
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
3	3	2	1	2	1	0	1	1	1	12
4	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	14
6	3	3	2	3	0	2	1	3	1	18
7	1	0	2	1	2	3	2	0	2	13

Table 1

## Perceived Stress Scale Statistical Analysis.

---

Mean and Standard Deviation	
M	19.67
SD	3.86

---

Note:  $n = 9$

## Themes

### *Reasons for Service: Care and Obedience*

The nine participants were asked one specific question to determine why they applied to be a resident assistant and two common reasons were stated. The first reason, seven of the nine participants voiced, was a general care for the women who live on their floor or wing and the belief their individual leadership giftedness could help improve the living unit. One student expressed her care for the women on her floor by saying, “it’s going to sound cheesy [but] I just love the girls on my floor... Also... it would be [my] fourth year on that floor and I just love it so I wanted to do something.” Another student, when asked the same question, simply stated, “I care about my floor.”

The second reason many students voiced for why they applied to be an RA was a desire to be placed in a situation where they would be stretched and challenged. They also shared they believed God was calling them to serve as an RA and, thus, the act of applying was an obedient response to God’s call on their lives. Two students shared their desire to be stretched and challenged as individuals through the role of RA:

*Participant 3:* I just kind of wanted to step into that role. I just thought it would be really good for me, really challenging for me, and I mean it might sound selfish, I just think along with stepping into a role like that comes a lot of new responsibilities and you working on yourself and I think that’s good for me.

*Participant 6:* I applied to be an RA because I felt like I was at a very flat point in my life where I felt really comfortable with how things were going and I wanted to stretch myself more. I wanted to put myself in a position where I would need to

learn how to set up boundaries and learn how to love without killing myself, if that makes sense. Like learning how to take time for myself but still be able pour into other people. That was probably the main reason, just like my personal growth.

A student shared she simply applied to be an RA because she felt God was calling her to do so although even up to the point of the interview, she still did not understand why. She simply believed she needed to trust there was a reason:

*Participant 8:* I just felt like that's what God was calling me to do and He knew it was something I didn't want to do...He just kind of put that desire in my heart and at pretty much the last minute...I didn't understand why, and most days I still don't understand why, and I know this is where He wants me and [I am] just learning how to trust.

#### *Stress Defined as Lack of Control*

The theoretical framework around which this study was based resulted in a highly individualistic approach in determining what is considered stressful for female RAs. Similarities in what these individuals considered stressful emerged throughout the nine interviews. The participants were asked to describe experiences they considered to be stressful or stress-inducing. The overall theme that emerged was participants experienced stress when they sensed an inability to control what was occurring in their lives. When asked what she considered stressful, one student's simplistic response was, "things that I can't control."

Many students referred to task-oriented responsibilities such as homework or planning and organizing activities relating to their RA position. Often with these specific

responsibilities students voiced they felt stress because they did not feel they had enough time to complete the task to the best of their ability.

Resident assistants in this study also discussed feeling an inability to control the individuals with which they were working. The RA role at the studied institution is highly relational and there is a strong emphasis placed on building community and relationships with others. One student talked about some frustrations she had from working to build relationships with the students on her floor due to a lack of engagement and interest for involvement on the part of those individuals. This caused her to experience stress in her role as she tried to find ways to bring the community together. The previous examples were given by participants when asked to describe what was stressful or stress-inducing throughout their first semester as an RA.

#### *Components Involved in Building Community*

It became apparent throughout the interviews various components involved in building community resulted in a significant amount of stress. Five out of the nine participants had several new freshmen move onto their living unit and each one of these students voiced the first weekend with new students on campus was a stressful time, meeting new faces and making sure parents and student's needs were all being met. One participant captured the various stress-inducing components involved within the process of building community.

*Participant 5:* When all the freshmen came it was really terrifying and...I just felt like I wasn't prepared at all. I remember our first RA meeting we were...sitting in the room and [the Residence Hall Director] goes through all the basics of... [what we are doing] and then she...finishes up and we are all silent and she...says, "Is

everything okay?” And we’re like, “No, it’s terrible,” because...[we just wanted] to do a really good job at...welcoming people and making everyone feel included and not really knowing if we were doing that very well...When all the freshmen come, they all come from such different backgrounds. Like some of them are really excited to come and some are terrified to be away from their families [and some are indifferent]...So it’s...that whole variety and it’s not like you can center on the ones who are afraid to be there and...trying to draw them in and miss out on all the other people. So...that first couple of weeks of trying to get to know everybody...but not knowing them and them not knowing [me]...That’s stressful for them I know and it was stressful for me too just because...I wanted them to feel welcomed and I wanted them to feel happy here and they weren’t. Well, I didn’t know if they were...The first few weeks were probably the hardest.

It became apparent the beginning of the school year was when the elements involved in building community caused the most stress. Several students shared stories about the difficulty involved in getting to know all of the new students in their living unit and the amount of time involved in building those relationships through one-on-one interaction and various planned activities. One participant shared: “I get stressed out about school a lot, but with...this semester it was a lot... more... stress about just trying to get to know everyone.”

These students view the development of a healthy community to be an important and large aspect of their job which partially explains why they experienced a significant amount of stress in the process of building community. Throughout the interviews it became clear these women were placing a great deal of pressure on themselves to build

community and they experienced feelings of inadequacy on a regular basis. These feelings of inadequacy were manifested in a variety of ways from feeling inadequate to lead spiritually, to trying to meet the expectations of the people within their living units, to feeling like they should be doing more as an RA than they were able to manage while juggling academics and the various responsibilities of their leadership role. The constant desire to please others caused some stress because they never knew if they were meeting other's expectations and typically felt as though they were letting someone down.

#### *Stressors from Relationships and Student Issues*

The participants were asked to describe what they experienced as an RA, and they were then asked to describe any stressful experiences they faced during first semester in other areas of their lives. When answering these questions, eight of the nine participants cited situations involving the people in their lives which caused a significant amount of the stress. For some students this relational stress was more directly connected to their role as an RA and for others it was connected to relationships with friends (off the wing or floor) and family members.

One student told about a number of situations involving elaborate scenarios with students in her living unit which she shared contributed to an elevated level of stress in her life.

*Participant 8:* We had someone get a concussion playing capture the flag and that was...something that I had to deal with for about two months because she was... really sick...It just seemed like when things were getting better everything just started coming down again. And I went to the ER about 5 times in a month, at

least...So just...doing all of that was really stressful and also...being a student and trying to take care of everyone, it was really hard for me to try and balance that...[And then] that finally ended which was really good...things seemed to be going okay for a short period of time...[Then] we had a girl who was really depressed and cutting a lot and so trying to...help take care of her and...trying to figure out...what I should be doing, and what I should be concerned about, and what I should not be concerned about, and what was just normal...The end of last semester was just really... a bad last couple of weeks.

The relational stress one RA shared was strictly related to her RA role. She had a complex discipline situation to handle on her floor in addition to her roommate finding out she needed to leave the institution for financial reasons. She shared throughout her interview these two situations in particular caused her the most stress outside of the stress she experienced from her schoolwork.

Another participant discussed a situation involving a friendship off of her floor which drained her emotionally and she felt as though she was unable to pour back into the students on her floor.

*Participant 1:* It was kind of stressful because I had some other...things going on in my life with...other relationships on campus that weren't going right, and so I was really...stressed out about...how can I...handle keeping in touch and working with these people, but also...be there for my floor enough that they...know I'm not just abandoning them....I was really stressed and worried about these other things that were going on, to the point where I just felt sort of exhausted emotionally all the time, and I felt like I didn't have anything left

to give to the floor. So, it was more of a stress about everything else, and then a little added guilt on top of that because I felt like I wasn't doing a good job.

The remaining three students discussed relational stress in their lives regarding significant parental issues when they were asked what caused stress in their life throughout the semester. One student was experiencing a situation where one of her parents was falsely accused of a crime, another student was experiencing the divorce of her parents, and the third student's parents were fighting frequently and there was an immense amount of tension within her family as a result.

The third RA's situation was unique because it was complex, involving several elements, including her relationship with God and her responsibility to care for others. The relational stress in her life was connected to several situations she had to handle on her floor with roommate conflicts, an on-going tense situation involving a student leader on her wing who ended up moving off the wing, and also some family-related stress. When asked what she experienced during the semester that caused stress in her life she responded with the following statements:

*Participant 6:* My mom had some medical issues [last] semester...so I had that stress on my mind and it was a very serious medical things...I also became aware that my parents weren't doing very well. They had been fighting for a long time and thankfully I have great friends and so I just keep reminding myself about that.

### *Academic Stress*

Four participants shared they took a lighter academic load because they were concerned about the time commitment the RA position would require. One student said, "I only took 13 which is the smallest amount I've ever taken and that was because I was

going to be an RA. I wanted to take a smaller amount.” Three students in the study shared they felt they were able to balance being a RA with their academics. Another student provided the following feedback regarding her ability to balance PA and student:

*Participant 6:* That one was one that I was really worried about when I came in and I thought it would be really tricky, but I actually felt like everything kind of intertwined well. Or like...things that I was doing as a student for classes...applied to the things I was doing as a RA. And I definitely slept less and was up later to get all of my work done for classes, so in that sense it...it took a lot to balance.

The remaining two students in the study are upperclassmen, science majors and they did not have the option to take less credit hours. These two students both shared they felt like they failed in the area of balancing their roles as student and RA:

*Participant 3:* Trying to be a good student has been difficult because you know what people always win with me so I always go there first. Good thing and a bad thing. There's balance in that and I struggle with that a lot.

*Participant 8:* It was very difficult I would say...I feel like I failed at that at the beginning because I just felt like I should always be around, but I can't get anything done in the dorm...I just can't concentrate...I've always gone to the library or union. Last semester I feel like I was able to limit that, but I still found it really hard to try and be around and available and still be able to get some things done in the dorm.

#### *Social Support and Positive Relationship with Residence Hall Director*

The participants were asked if they believed the close relationships they had in their lives were helping or hindering them from being successful as a student and as an

RA. All of the participants shared they believed they were adequately supported and even mentioned several examples and ways they felt supported.

Several shared the team bonding activities with the residence life staff which took place at the beginning of the year was beneficial in helping them to establish relationships with all of the RAs on campus, as well as the RAs within their individual halls. They felt like the team bonding that occurred during that time was helpful as they moved into the school year and often sought out other RAs and Residence Hall Directors for support.

*Participant 4:* The whole [Residence Life] trip, and all the bonding that happened just going in, I think that was all very beneficial for our staff and it kind of helped us get on the same page in terms of our relationships which is... a huge support.

In addition to the social support the RAs felt they developed with their peers within Residence Life, eight of the nine participants also expressed having a very positive relationship with their Residence Hall Director and they shared their thankfulness for this relationship. Many were surprised by the care their Residence Hall Director showed them as a whole person and not simply as a RA. Participants were asked to describe their relationship with their Residence Hall Director. The following quote captures the essence of the comments these participants made regarding this relationship:

*Participant 2:* I feel like I get a lot from our one-on-ones. I kind of expected them before I came into this to be really formal...but he also wants to know how I'm doing personally... I don't know why, but I didn't expect that so that's really nice to know that he doesn't just care about me as a RA, but he also cares about me as a person.

Many of the students in the sample had Co-RAs on their floors, but there were some who did not. All of the students who had Co-RAs shared their relationship with that individual was a positive one and they valued the opportunities they have to collaborate with another individual on their floor when situations arise. Two participants who did not have Co-RAs, shared how they had though and were curious about how much less stressful their job might be if they did have a Co-RA. Each living unit at the studied institution selects an additional volunteer leader and two other students in the sample talked about their relationship with this particular individual; one student had a positive relationship and the other did not.

*Participant 7:* She's fantastic. She's like the most joyful encouraging person ever. I've been able to really rely on her as if she was sometimes a Co-RA. Just talk things out with her, process things externally and it's just really nice to have that outlet...She's fantastic with the floor and with me.

The RA who did not have a positive experience with the other volunteer leader on her floor shared "it was a very very stressful semester in that sense because I didn't have an ally...in my [living unit]."

In conclusion, the six themes which were determined as a result of this research study do help to shed some light on the experiences of female resident assistants as stressful situation surface throughout an academic semester. Within this sample we see the majority of participants desired to be a student leader in this capacity because they genuinely cared about the women they would be working with. The study also showed oftentimes when participants described times when they experienced stress, they also expressed feeling as though they lacked some level of control within the situation. More

specifically, the study showed resident assistants experienced stress most often because of the people in their lives and not because of their academics, however, the majority of the sample did feel as though they had the necessary social support elsewhere to overcome the relational stressors present in their lives.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Research Implications

We know female college students are typically more prone than males to perceive certain experiences as stress-inducing (Dusselier et al., 2005; Hicks & Miller, 2006; Misra & McKean, 2000; Stevenson & Harper, 2006). In this study I examined how female RAs are experiencing stress both associated and not associated to their leadership role. All of the participants in the study shared their RA role did cause stress in their lives, but the extent to which the stress was caused by their leadership responsibilities varied between each participant. Given the results of the study, there are several implications for residence life professionals to consider when working with RAs. They have a responsibility to provide training and support for their RAs which will enable them to be successful in all areas of their lives. This section will discuss some of the findings specifically and provide recommendations for practitioners in their work with students.

There were a number of factors in student's lives which resulted in the perception of stress. Some shared academics caused more stress than their role as an RA. Other's shared about their family life, and those students alluded to the notion being physically separated from the stress caused by their family circumstances provided a sense of

retreat. Those students who seemed to experience larger amounts of stress as a result of their leadership position had a number of crisis situations to handle. RAs shared the unpredictable nature of those events precipitated higher levels of perceived stress.

Although, the experience of stress should not always be considered negative (Selye, 1976), it is important an individual have social support which enables them to successfully work through the stress in their lives. Students in this particular study did feel they had the social support necessary to be successful as a student leader and as a student. There are several factors at work which create this network of social support for these particular students: family, friends, relationships with other resident assistants within their residence hall. In addition to these components of social support, is the positive relationship these students had with their Residence Hall Director. Students shared stories about their experiences throughout the semester which reflected the importance of these relationships and the positive influence these relationships had in their lives.

It is apparent the students within this study felt strongly connected and supported by their hall's Residence Life staff. Many shared stories about their thankfulness for the Residence Life trip which occurred at the beginning of the school year. They stated this experience not only was very enjoyable, but also very important in helping them to connect well with the other RAs on staff. When asked to describe their relationship with their Co-RA, other RAs in the hall, or their Residence Hall Director, several of the participants pointed back to their experience on the Residence Life trip playing a key role in the development of the social support they had within their residence life staff.

These findings emphasize the importance of a strong, established support system in order for RAs to be successful in all areas of their life. Residence life professionals should develop opportunities for students to build strong connections among the members of their residence life staff starting at the beginning of the academic school year. According to this study, providing an opportunity where students have a significant amount of time to get to know one another at the beginning of the school year seems to be an effective way to help RAs begin to develop relationships with other staff members. This study also showed the relationship between the RA and Residence Hall Director was valued by the RA. Residence Hall Directors should set aside a specific time where they meet one-on-one with their RAs in order to support these students as an individual and as a leader within the residence hall.

#### Limitations

The results from this study provide good insight into the experiences of female resident assistants and stress; however, there are some limitations to the study which need to be addressed. The first limitation is the bias the primary research has regarding female resident assistants. The researcher served as a resident assistant for two years and was also working as a Residence Hall Director at the studied institution when the study was being conducted. These two experiences naturally result in researcher bias. Also, a result of the researcher's work in Residence Life at the studied institution, the researcher knew many of the participants in some capacity.

There are also a few limitation specifically related to the data which was collected. First, the data collected was based on self-report and the assumption participants understood their stress experience and were able to articulate the experience

well within the context of an interview. Secondly, the participants in the sample only had one semester of experience to speak from instead of an entire academic school year thus, limiting the findings. Third, the findings of this study cannot be generalized across all higher education institutions, but can be transferable at universities of a similar make-up to the studied institution.

#### Future Research

In this qualitative study I provide a basic profile for the experiences of female resident assistants and stress, the results of which represents an initial attempt at providing insight into these complex issues. Additional research studies should be conducted to provide a more robust picture of the role of stress in the lives of resident assistants. More specifically, research comparing the experience of stress between genders would be beneficial to student development practitioners as they work to support these student leaders. It would also be valuable to conduct studies which specifically relate to the coping mechanisms used by students. The aim of conducting research related to coping would be to determine if students are utilizing healthy or unhealthy coping mechanisms and then to develop training which assists students as they develop and work to implement healthy coping skills. Additionally in this study I showed spirituality impacted the stress experiences of RAs. Thus, it would be beneficial to conduct research regarding the role of spirituality and coping among RAs, as that particular body of literature is quite small. It would be beneficial for further research to be conducted which compares the stress and coping experiences among students who are serving for the first time as an RA and other students who have had one to two years of experience. Research which addresses these topics would be beneficial in assisting student development

practitioners as they continue to learn how to work alongside and develop students at all levels. Lastly, conducting research regarding stress among RAs at various types of institutions is important as the role of an RA is much different at a small evangelical institution compared to a large more diverse institution, but currently there is no research which compares the two experiences.

### Conclusion

It is evident in this study female resident assistants are experiencing stress, however for the most part they have been able to balance their role with their academics, given the social support present in their lives. The results of this study only shed a little bit of light on the experiences of resident assistants and provides practitioners with a research based picture of the experiences and challenges faced by resident assistants. Future researchers have the opportunity to further explore the role of stress in the lives of resident assistants as a whole. In addition, student development practitioners have the opportunity to take what has been learned through this study and develop training and support components which will enable resident assistants to feel supported and grow throughout their time as a student leader in a residence hall. These two benefits alone exhibit the value behind this study.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- 1.) What is your major/minor, class rank, and how many credit hours are you taking this semester?
- 2.) Why did you apply to be a RA?
- 3.) Describe your experience thus far as a RA. What types of things have defined your role as a RA this semester?
- 4.) When you experience stress how do you typically respond?
- 5.) What have you experienced this semester that has been stress-inducing for you? Why were these things stressful for you?
- 6.) Taking into consideration the various roles you fill in your life at this moment, what causes you to experience stress? Do you think the amount of stress you experience due to these things is reasonable or unreasonable and why?
- 7.) Describe the types of relationships you have in your life, ranging from your family, to friends, Co-RA relationship, and relationship with hall director.
- 8.) Do you believe the people you are surrounded by are helping or hindering you from being successful in the various roles you currently fill?
- 9.) Describe your ability to balance your RA role with your academics last semester?

## APPENDIX B: PERCEIVED STRESS SCALE

Instructions: The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, please indicate with a check how often you felt or thought a certain way.

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and “stressed?”

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

\_\_\_0=never \_\_\_1=almost never \_\_\_2=sometimes \_\_\_3=fairly often \_\_\_4=very often

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to gain insight about the experience of female Personnel Assistants and how these individuals perceive stress impacting their everyday life.

### PROCEDURE

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one 30-45 minute interview conducted by a Kristen Osborne, a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development Program. You will also be asked to complete a short 10-item survey relating to stress and how it may or may not have influenced your live over the last month.

### RISKS AND BENEFITS

The risks involved with participation in this study are limited. You will be asked to provide information about stress-inducing experiences over the last semester which may stir up some negative emotions. The researcher recommends seeking out the campus counseling center should you have a difficult time working through some of the emotions attached to these stressful experiences.

To schedule an appointment you may call or email the counseling center:  
(765) 998-5222 or [counselingcenter@taylor.edu](mailto:counselingcenter@taylor.edu)

The institution will benefit a great deal from your participation in this study. The information you provide will be used by the institution in the future to more effectively train and support Personnel Assistants.

### PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY

All information provided to the researcher throughout the study will be kept confidential. The information you provide will be viewed by the researcher, her thesis supervisor, and possibly student researchers. Your name will not appear anywhere within the data which is collected. Your data will be assigned a participant number in order to keep the information you provide private.

### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPTION AND WITHDRAWAL FROM STUDY

Participation in this study is voluntary. Should you decide at any point in time not to participate in the study, there will be no negative consequences associated with your decision. If you decide to participate, please take note that you may withdrawal from the study at any time and you also have the right to refrain from answering any questions you do not feel comfortable answering within the study.

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By signing this form I attest that I have read and understand the information provided above.

Participants Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participants Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_